

Whither Flood Action Plan?

by Dr Saleemul Huq

THE past few days have seen a spate of activities and conferences on the Flood Action Plan (FAP) which has just completed its first five-year study and pilot phase and is to be followed by another five years of developing an Integrated National Water Management Strategy with some priority projects. On the 25th of November there was a demonstration of villagers in Tangail against the Compar-tment-taliation Pilot Project (CPP) or FAP 20. This was followed on 27 November by a day long "People's Conference on FAP" in Dhaka. Then on 30 November and 1 December the fourth conference was held followed on 3 and 4 December by a government-donor conference to discuss future funding for the water management strategy.

donors, media and NGOs and a number of informative papers were presented and lively discussion held on the different issues. While the discussion may not have resolved all the differences of opinions between the critics and proponents of FAP, it was an important step forward in identifying areas of agreement where progress can be made and areas of disagreement where re-evaluation may be needed.

From the donors side there were no specific commitments although a joint statement appreciating the new strategy and specifically endorsing the involvement of NGOs and urging the government to continue to work with the NGOs in future was prepared. However, some

methodologies of resolving any disagreements that may remain. The following are some thoughts on how this could be achieved.

Water Management Strategy: The future water management strategy must ensure in its very inception and institutional set up a process for genuine participation by different sectoral agencies such as agriculture, fisheries, environment, etc. as well as non-government sectors including academics, NGOs, people's representatives, etc. If this is not ensured in the initial structure it will be almost impossible to do it

FAP it would make sense to re-examine this project with an open mind. This would be particularly opportune now as it has just undergone a re-formulation by the donors which acknowledges past mistakes and makes provision for more effective people's participation and even compensation for negative impacts. One way forward would be for the project proponents along with the critical NGOs together to undertake an exercise to consult people in a manner acceptable to both groups. This would imply that both sides must abide by the verdict given by the people. Thus if the people do not want the project, then government and donors should stop and even dismantle it if necessary, while on the other hand the critics must agree to allow the project to continue and even assist it if the people want the project to go ahead.

Role of the NGOs: Although everyone is now agreed that people's participation is necessary, it is also recognised that it is very difficult to achieve. The involvement of NGOs are sometimes regarded by some as a surrogate for people's participation. This is a danger that should be avoided. The people's elected representatives at both local and national level should be the ones to be involved. Nevertheless, the NGOs have relatively good experiences in working with the very poorest sections of the rural community and also have valuable experience in involving their participation in many kinds of activities. This experience should be seen as a resource to be harnessed in future, particularly with respect to developing methodologies for people's participation. One practical way forward may, therefore, be to undertake a joint Government-NGO exercise in a selected area in a participatory and environmentally sound manner to show that it can indeed be done.

The writer is Executive Director, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, a non-government policy and research institute.

People's Conference on FAP

This included over 350 participants with more than 250 coming from outside Dhaka, most of them women. The people came from Tangail, Gaibandha, Sylhet, Chandpur, Jamalpur and other parts of the country and included farmers, fishermen, rickshaw pullers, boatmen, grassroots NGO workers and others. The meeting was organised jointly by the Coalition of Environmental NGOs (CEN) and the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) and also included representatives of national and international NGOs, academics, researchers, donors as well as FAP consultants and officials.

The participants spoke about their experience and opinions regarding three issues, namely the "FAP Process", "Flood Control vs Water Management" and "People's Participation in Water Sector Planning". Many people, including several women from Tangail spoke of harassment they had to face for carrying out activities against FAP 20 in their areas. The meeting also included a presentation on a book on FAP entitled "Rivers of Life" jointly published by the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) and PANOS of Lon-

Fourth FAP Conference

Subsequently on 30 November and 1 December the official Fourth FAP Conference organised by the Flood Plan Coordination Organisation (FPCCO) was held in the International Conference Centre in Dhaka which was to have been inaugurated by the Prime Minister and addressed by the Ministers of Finance, Water Resources and Planning. However, the Prime Minister and Ministers of Finance and Planning were unable to attend so it was inaugurated by the Minister for Water Resources.

After the inaugural session, Technical Sessions were held on "Strategy in Water Sector", "FAP Process", "Peoples' Participation", "Environment", "Prioritisation", "Institutional Development" and "Next Steps". Each session had a paper presented from FPCCO's side with designated discussants representing academia, government, NGOs and donors for each paper except in the case of "Environment" and "Peoples' Participation" where the NGOs presented their own papers in addition to FPCCO's ones.

The conference was participated by several hundred representatives of government, FPCCO, BWDB, universities, research institutes,

Government-Donor Conference

The government-donor



Under the rain, in the deluge: Will there be a safe haven for them? —Photo: Salahuddin Aziz/DRINK

conference, held at the NEC in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, was inaugurated on 3 December by the Minister of Finance and State Ministers of Water Resources and Planning respectively. In their addresses both the Finance Minister and State Minister for Planning admitted that they had themselves been critical of the FAP when it was formulated in 1989/90 for concentrating too much on structural solutions for pure flood protection. They both ex-

plained satisfaction with the change incorporated in the new Water Management Strategy on year round Water Management including both floods and drought and stated that the new strategy had been accepted and endorsed by the Cabinet.

Way Forward

The activities in the last few days as briefly described above have brought to the forefront the important issue of water resource management in future and how to move forward in a positive direction where general agreement can be reached and develop acceptable

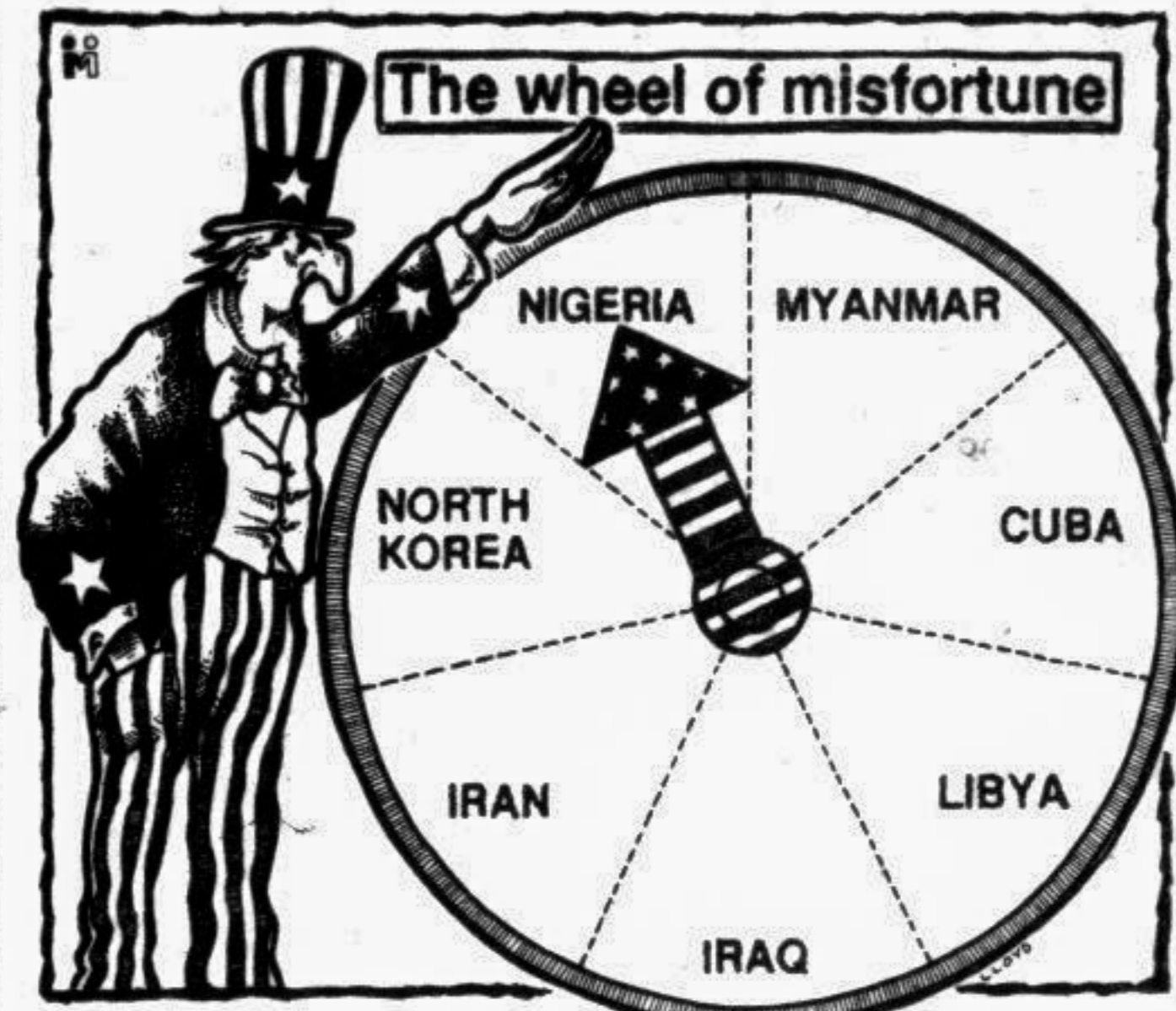
later. The FAP's mid-term course correction away from "Floods to Water Management" failed to gain much credibility because it had already started on the wrong foot. If this is not sorted out at the beginning it will come back to haunt the effort in future. There is also need to build flexibility into the planning process so that lessons learnt can be acted upon.

CPP: As the Tangail CPP is the most visible and also the most controversial project of

Hounds Home in on the Latest Pariah

M G G Pillai writes from Kuala Lumpur

The "world community" appears always to be on the lookout for an out-of-step government to pillory. The exercise is frequently hypocritical with the interests of rich and powerful countries placed before all else.



AS Nigeria becomes the latest pariah country for hanging nine minority-rights activists, including the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, the preceding pariah, France, gets off the hook.

No surprise there, because despite the protests against French nuclear tests in the Pacific — a far more outrageous act than those committed by most previous pariahs — France cannot really qualify: to be the bad guy, you have to be a developing country.

However, Nigeria can rest assured that Western proponents of "good governance" and "human rights" will soon seek a new target, at which point Nigeria, too, will fade from the spotlight.

This international targeting of pariahs — orchestrated by a Western phalanx of often unaccountable, opportunistic non-government organisations, sections of the media and governments — attempts to force the world to follow narrow definitions of democratic government.

These definitions are a stick with which to beat out-of-line regimes, even if, like Cuba, the "guilty" governments have delivered health and welfare services that have significantly improved the lives of many of their people.

The speed of international electronic communications makes it easy to focus attention on a single issue or country with instantaneous effect, irrespective of whether the underlying premise for that focus is correct.

Myanmar, North Korea, Somalia, Libya, Iran, Iraq are in turn clobbered for actions which the world community — in other words, the major Western nations — decides, at a particular moment, are unacceptable.

But truth and reality are more complex issues than are suggested by this instant punditry. The internal conditions which caused the external outrage are rarely examined as the hysteria gathers momentum. And the offending pariahs are rarely given any support in tackling the problems with which they are grappling.

Cambodia, for example, got the "free elections" the West desired, but when the anticipated problem-free administration did not follow, the international community lost interest.

Frequently, there is a hidden agenda behind subsequent actions far different from the stated cause of the "outrage" — such as, in the case of Iraq, access to oil.

In addition, the choice of pariahs is highly selective. Saudi Arabia has been off the agenda, although its political system hardly accords with the values the West likes to trumpet. But it is a staunch Western ally, key oil producer and major arms buyer — all qualities that militate against pariah status. Similarly, although China has faced some criticism of its domestic policies, the charges are generally muted because of the lucrative trade

deals believed to be on the horizon.

Interventions are an infringement of one country's internal affairs. That might be acceptable if they were applied by due process based on clearly enunciated, carefully considered principles, equally applied to rich and poor; but they are applied only by the strong against the weak: the rich against the poor.

The strong and the rich do not have to worry about defending their sovereignty, because they are strong and rich enough to be sure no-one will interfere.

In the case where the pariah label was fully deserved — apartheid South Africa — and sanctions were approved by the party representing the majority of the people, the major Western nations had to be "dragged into committing themselves even on a partial basis."

And when Third World governments point out the arbitrariness of these pressures — as Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed is wont to do — it causes bitter resentment in the West.

Some of the initial motivation for whipping up a storm of protest against individual countries may be genuine anger about policies and practices. But by the time the media, and then governments, join in, other factors are usually in play.

One is the need for an enemy, particularly now that the end of the Cold War has removed "the evil empire". Another is the opportunity for national leaders to put on a show of toughness for their electorates, by invading Grenada or bombing Tripoli.

The trend towards victimisation is happening simultaneously with a shift in "humanitarian" relief policies towards greater interventionism. Alex de Waal of the London-based human-rights organisation, Africa Rights, pointed out in a recent discussion paper: "The violation of national sovereignty in pursuit of humanitarian objectives has become acceptable."

NGOs increasingly act as news agencies and diplomats, he argues, building up pressures for Western intervention.

Again, the issue is not whether or not situations justify relief or even, as with Somalia, armed intervention, but the unpredictable, arbitrary, unaccountable nature of that intervention. It always seems to end up based not on principle, but on the interests of the rich and powerful industrialised countries.

— GEMINI NEWS

M G G PILLAI is a Malaysian journalist who writes and broadcasts regularly on South-East Asian affairs.

CORRIGENDUM

The caption of the picture with the article "Fighting against Fatwa" in the "Focus" page of December 6, should have read "Mobilizing to protest" as inadvertently printed. The error is regretted.

High Dosage Raises Hopes Higher

Ekram Kabir, recently in Chittagong

THE 40th session of countrywide Vitamin A Week that ran from October 28 to November 5 was truly a hard work for the health workers with the new approach tried out for the first time since 1973.

"It was much easier for the health assistants over the last 39 campaigns to go from door to door and distribute high-dose V-A capsules to mothers of target age-group children," said Monoranjan Barua, a health assistant in Patia thana, 19 miles off Chittagong city, adding, "But this approach, though labourious, will be much more effective."

And that was the reason why, waiting at the courtyard of Dayal Hari Sen's house on October 29, Pankaj Kumar Chowdhury had a busy week's tale to tell. Chowdhury was one of 66 health assistants interchanging around Patia's 22 unions conducting Vitamin A supplementation to the thana's 69,107 kids between the age-group of one and six years.

Five hundred and twenty-eight centres were set up by the thana health administration, and mothers were informed in advance as to which centre would dole out Vitamin A capsules (VACs) on which days during the week. And during this 'in-advance' time, thana health assistants (THAs), volunteers and NGO workers went around villages, explaining to every household why the children

needed this extra dosage of Vitamin A. In addition to this, they also imparted knowledge on iodine deficiency disorders (IDD).

"Mainly, volunteers and NGO workers carried out the mobilisation, registration of children's names and follow-ups," said Muhammad Latif, deputy chief of the Chittagong division UNICEF office. The UNICEF provided necessary technical assistance for the week's campaign.

This centre-based approach was identified during the NIDs — national immunisation days — on March 16 and April 16 earlier this year when 85 per cent of polio vaccine coverage nationwide was achieved. On the two NIDs, the parents — specially mothers — brought their under-five children at centers set up all over the country.

"In Patia, the polio vaccine coverage rate on NIDs was 96 per cent," said Salahuddin Ahmed, the thana health and family planning officer, though he admitted that for the V-A Week an unexpected problem was added to the already-low-level of awareness among the people. The back-up that made the NIDs a success was absent regarding this Week.

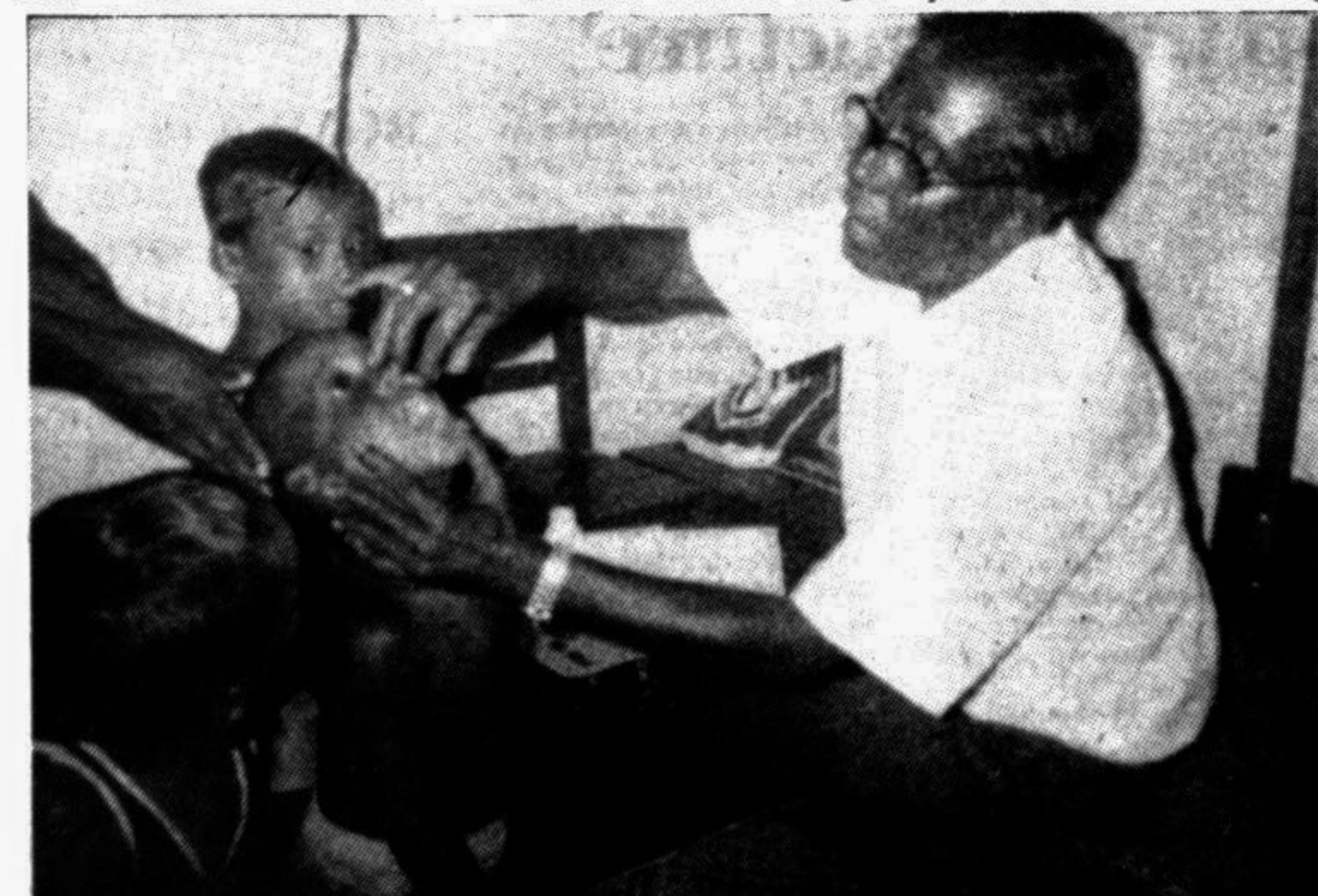
Some 70,000 volunteers — who comprised of school/college/madrasa teachers,

students, imams, NGO workers and other social workers — had taken their self-initiated part in social mobilisation and awareness campaigns during the NIDs. But for the Vitamin A Week, few of those were found to have turned up, and even, participation of the NGO community was also below that of the NID level.

The lack of proper groundwork and time-shortage deprived the health assistants of Patia the right kind of willful support they needed. Moreover, with all the thana's educational institutions — 50 schools, seven colleges and 17 madrasas — open at that time, it was not possible to get the students as volunteers. Apparently, Patia authority takes education very seriously with its 44.3 per cent literacy rate among Patia's 423,834 population.

According to Salahuddin Ahmed: there were some institutional problems as well. The district planning meeting for the V-A Week was called on October 11, which being too close to the launching date marred the process of necessary preparation work. Moreover, mid-October witnessed killing of a student political activist which led to some sporadic hartals in the southern Chittagong district.

Still, problems aside, Pankaj Kumar Chowdhury was, a little after the lunch-hour, waiting — he knew the villagers would come up with their babies, because the past two days of work made him confident enough that he was going to meet his target of giving Vacs to all the one-to-six age-group children registered — 1,864 — in the Ward



Health assistant Parag Ranjan Barua feeding V-A capsule to a kid in Kachua union.

No. 1. Said Chowdhury: "If they don't turn up, I'll go for myself knocking at door to door telling them to come to the centre, and even if they fail, they'll still have the chance to get their babies Vitamin A fed on the last two days — November 4 and 5 — of the Week."

The THA was sure to get

arm: "I came to learn about this centre two days ago from a health assistant who went informing at our village." He had some extent of knowledge on what malnutrition can do to the growing up children.

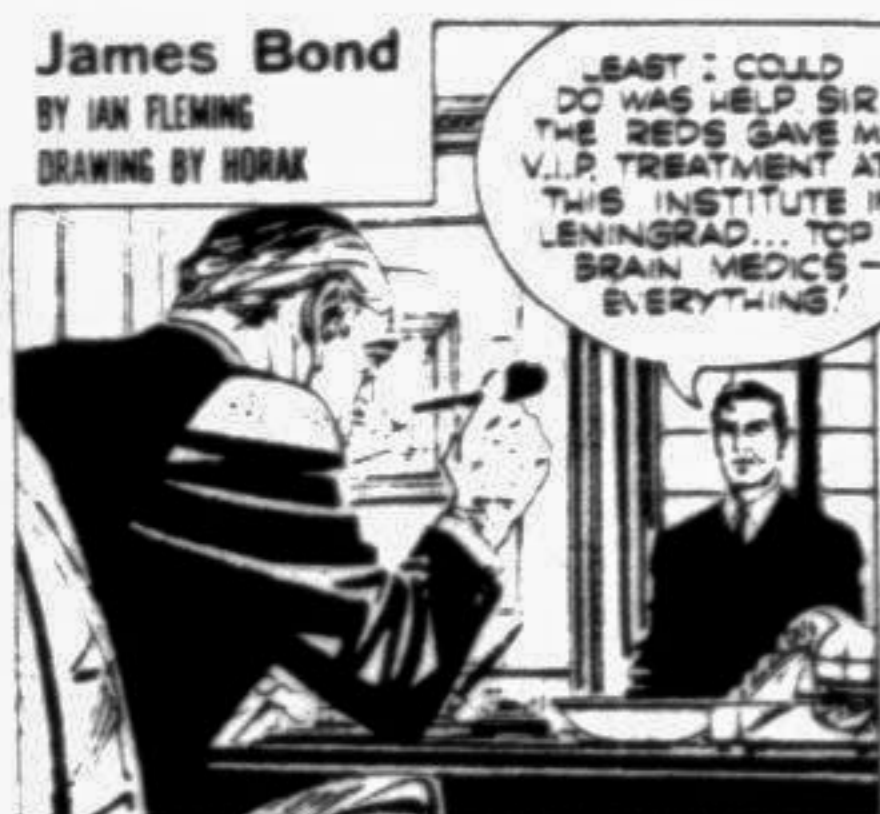
By 1:35 pm, Hossain had 32 of his 257 beforehand registered kids to turn up. But at the centre where he was assigned the day before, it was a bristle's miss on his part with five of the 227 reg-

his work done — walking down to houses, informing the villagers the dates on which he would be working in all the eight centres set up in his Ward — and was well-prepared for it, but he thought all that wouldn't be very necessary. People will eventually turn up once they know that the initiative was to make their kids disease-free. The encouraging mobilisation of the NIDs gave them such confidence.

Explained Salahuddin Ahmed in this regard: "The need for vaccination can be made understood readily as the people know that vaccines will prevent some crippling diseases which are visible. But it's not quite easy to make them believe the need for Vitamin A for the children." It takes some time, but works, he said.

If Chowdhury's confidence was anything to count on, it was also evident in Mozaffar Hossain who was busy working at Nurul Islam's home as another centre in another part of the Ward 1.

Understandably, to a certain extent, parents around Hossain were more or less informed why Vitamin A was needed for their children's future physical well-being. Said one elderly-looking man, carrying his child in



James Bond BY IAN FLEMING DRAWING BY HORAK

